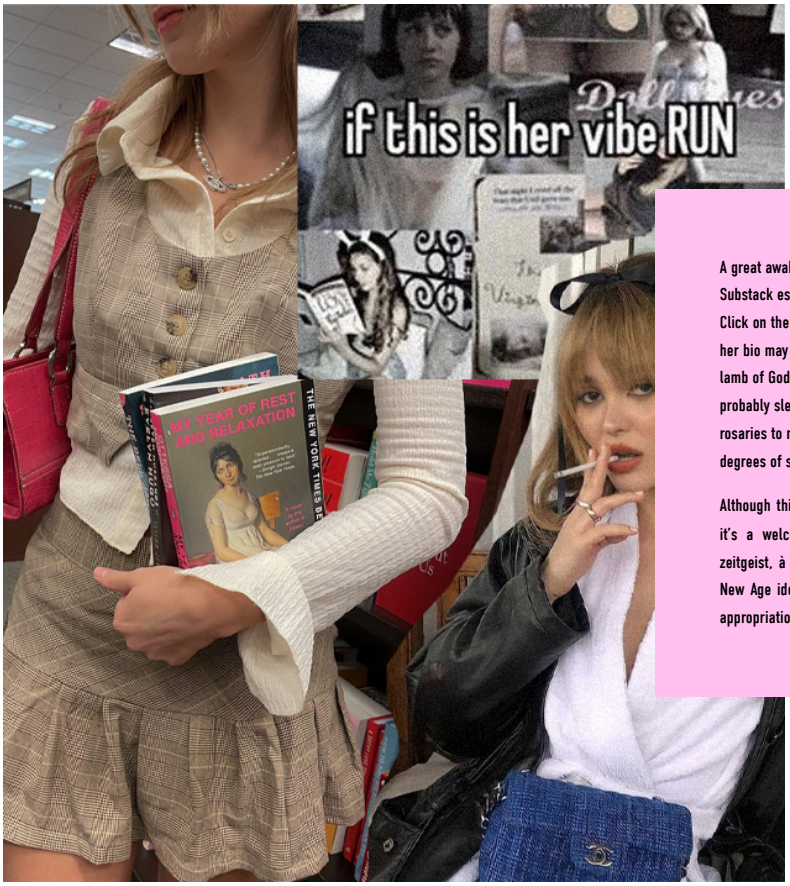
I Want a Perfect Body, I Want a Perfect Soul: How Catholic Aestheticism Became Fodder for Pro-Ana Accounts



A great awakening is upon us. It-girl writers are churning out feverish, God-pilled Substack essays and wearing meta-ironic streetwear bearing religious iconography. Click on the Instagram profile of any esoteric influencer with a dissociative pout, and her bio may read something along the lines of 'perfect, sinless angel' or 'behold, the lamb of God' where it once bore her astrological 'big 3'. A few years ago, she was probably sleeping with rose quartz under her pillow, talismans since replaced by rosaries to match the spiritual aesthetic du jour. Catholicism is cool again, to varying degrees of sincerity, depending on who you ask.

Although this traditional-as-transgressive trend has naturally been met with backlash, it's a welcome reprieve from the superficial TikTok-spirituality that saturates the zeitgeist, à la 'lucky girl syndrome', the latest in a never-ending cycle of repackaged New Age ideas of mantric manifestation. It's also decidedly less problematic than the appropriation and whitewashing of Eastern religious symbols.

One subculture has adopted this aesthetic with the zeal of the convert: Eating disorder Twitter, or 'edtwt'. It's supposedly divisible into two camps: one a community for documenting recovery and seeking support, the other a sinister, anti-recovery cesspool of 'pro-ana' rhetoric. The conceit that you can belong to one without encountering the other is as dangerous as it is foolish. Turn over a stone and you will find some of the most abhorrent content on the internet: girls in their early teens with BMIs to match their age and a disciplic devotion to staying sick, whilst encouraging others to do the same. They spur each other on, competitive and jealous, engaged in the inherent, unspoken contest to be the 'best' anorexic. Anorexia is discussed sardonically and self-deprecatingly, in the offhand manner one might speak of a fraught, on-again-off-again relationship; it is seldom referred to as an illness.

The pro-ana penchant for frail beauty has ostensibly found a home in the stained-glass gleam of Catholicism. Within the immersive world of ED Twitter, there exists a godless fusion of mysticism and masochism, a simulacrum of faith borrowed from numerology, reworked psalms and prayers, and quasi-religious vocabulary.

Perusing the Twitter profiles of these 'trad-cath waifs' reveals Tweets rife with vitriolic body-shaming, interspersed with thinspirational photos of emaciated blondes wearing Brandy Melville tank tops and crucifixes around their necks. Popular usernames include some iteration of *starvingangel*, *heavensentwaif*, or *biblicalbambi*, accompanied by profile descriptions such as 'devout, doe-eyed, disintegrating doll', and 'god's favourite girlblogger'. Current and goal weights are listed alongside a delicate array of ballet-shoe emojis and Latin crosses. Lily-Rose Depp and Saint Catherine of Siena are mentioned in the same breath, the objects of their idolatry.

The eternal Christian conflict of the spirit versus the flesh has long found a battleground in the form of food; from Eve's gluttonous original sin and humanity's subsequent separation from God, to the phenomenon of anorexia mirabilis, the medieval predecessor to the relatively modern anorexia nervosa, 'a far older form of self-starvation rooted in Christian notions of suffering and service.'

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Anorexia mirabilis is a disease of the past, pathologised out of existence. It was predicated on a worldview that cannot exist in the 21st century, the idea that a person can be freed from hunger and other worldly desires through a connection to the holy; a far cry from the vague, tongue-in-cheek God-posting of ED Twitter. There are, however, similarities between the two; for both St Gemma Galgani and Twitter user *deadgirlwalking1762*, the appeal lies in the escape from the corporeal, the desire to shed the imperfection of one's physical being in pursuit of the weightless purity of the spiritual.

"The internet kind of functions as this third realm," says Jana Surkova, co-founder of Delude Magazine, a publication 'at the apex of content culture'. She's also a Tumblr survivor and a former teenage girl. "When you're online, you're outside of your body. You're like a spirit floating on the internet. You can express yourself however you want to express yourself...There's no way anybody could really prove what your actual weight is. Nobody sees you. You can be anything, you can be anybody."

Surkova cannot, in good faith, dismiss one kind of anorexia as self-absorption and not the other. "For a lot of women who were later proclaimed saints, they suffered with holy anorexia, and for them it was about a sense of pride and vanity as well: that they were better than other people who were suffering, they were chosen by God to suffer in this very specific way," she says. "I think that's a similar mindset, where it is about a desire to connect to something greater for both groups, and it is also about vanity for both groups, and about wanting to seem like you're better than others.

"This person is not as skinny as me. They're not as sick as me. Their suffering is not as valid as mine."

Anorexia has long been linked to control. It requires an iron will, a ritualistic commitment to a slow death. It's the most successful of all mental illnesses, boasting the highest mortality rate. Perhaps the attraction of saintly asceticism, of the symbolic, sacrificial imitation of Christ's suffering, is tied to the delusion that anorexia can be admirable, or transcendental, or romantically tragic; anything but the disease it is. That it's not mere self-harm, but self-mortification. But there is no eternal reward for self-destruction, and you can't starve your way to salvation.

Words: Jordan Passauer

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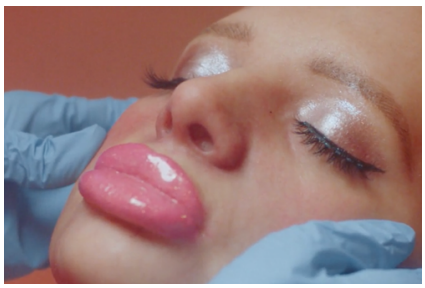

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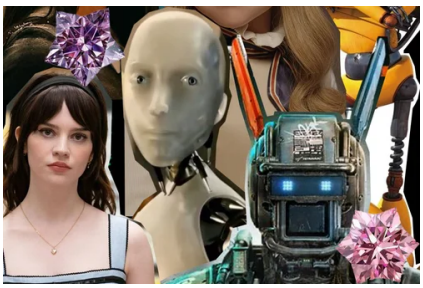

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